

OUT OF THE PAST

The Photography of James Welling

By David Deitcher

Like Charles Baudelaire before him, Roland Barthes was not impressed by the camera's mimetic power. Most photographs inspired little more than interest, or "studium," in the French critic. In writing *Camera Lucida*, he was not merely seeking the cause of his "interest" in photography, but of his captivation with a handful of photographs. He found that this captivation coincided with the existence of something in certain photographs that shattered their seamless illusion, which he referred to by the term "punctum" (Latin for "sting," "speck," "cut" or "prick").

Such disruptions might be caused by a photographic detail that triggers unconscious thought processes in a random observer, unleashing emotions that are as difficult to comprehend as they are to control. Or they might be due to the congruity of a picture's overall subject matter with what, for Barthes, was the central feature of photography itself: a collision of past into present that Barthes encapsulated in the phrase "that-has-been."¹

In James Welling's art, he takes advantage of photography's unique ability to invoke the past while measuring our distance from it. In 1977 he began a project consisting of intimately scaled close-ups of pages from a travel diary that belonged to a young woman, long since dead. The diary's antiquity is as discernable in the elegant script as it is in the dead leaves, ferns, and other mementos that have been pressed between its pages. A compatible melancholy and sense of yearning inhabits the wintry landscapes and interiors that establish a sense of place in the American Northeast, and complete *Diary of Elizabeth C. Dixon, 1840-41 (1822-72)/ Connecticut Landscapes (1977-86)*.

This series, for which Welling first became known, constituted his initial response to the cul-de-sac that he, like other members of his generation, detected in modernist art and photography during the mid-to-late-1970s. Welling's details of the diary - testament to a remote past - make it appear close at hand, while his studies of an eminently accessible contemporary landscape make it seem rather distant. Such a preference

for subterfuge over unmediated directness differentiates this series from the expressive and metaphoric mandate of modernist photography, and aligns it with the allegorical procedures of postmodernist art.

That Elizabeth C. Dixon (Welling's great, great grandmother) assembled her diary on a grand tour of Europe at the very moment of photography's birth underscores the reflexivity of this project. To examine these photographs is to reflect upon the epochal significance of that invention. Casting fragments from Dixon's *aidé memoire* in partial shadow, or slightly overexposing its fields of script, these pictures suggest the inadequacy of human memory and the inexorable transitoriness of experience. Reflecting upon such distressing facts of life, which industrialized modernity had only aggravated, Sigmund Freud referred, in part, to photography when he noted that "Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God."²

The dark retrospectivity in Welling's art is not without its humor, a subtle and unsettling wit that is secreted among the strata of random, often contradictory layers of meaning that accumulate in the work of allegorists. In 1980, Welling began a series of black-and-white photographs that are little larger than daguerreotypes, and just as jewel-like. Fitted with generous white mats and slim black frames, these images realize a shimmering superabundance of graphic detail. Upon close examination it becomes apparent that this richly textured topography is generated by nothing more than a crumpled sheet of aluminum foil. The effect of such a visual pun is ultimately historical, prompting spectators to consider their distance from the landscape tradition that the artist is calling to mind.

Irony is about as apparent in these and other works from the early 1980s as it ever gets in Welling's art. As discernible as this irony is, however, it coexists with sincerity that results from a direct material engagement with the aesthetic traditions that this artist brackets with at least as much affection as skepticism. In his most recent encounters with familiar photographic genres, so completely does Welling adhere to the pro-

cedures they require that the reflexive thread that connects these works with the rest of his project is more elusive than ever.

In *Railroad Photographs* (1986-91) an *Architectural Photographs* (1988-1990), Welling returns to familiar territory after an absence of several years. (Between 1984 and 1988 he devoted most of his energy to exploring the representational conventions of "abstraction" in photographs and paintings.) Both series evoke the post-Civil War era that Welling has acknowledged as an enduring source of inspiration for his work.³

Railroad Photographs consists of forthright studies of contemporary American trains and the landscape they helped transform.⁴ Nevertheless, these pictures communicate the kind of disparate meanings that characterize Wellings approach, and mark it as metatextual. This is implied in Welling's use of the standard "wedge" and "roster" shots that, among others, consolidated to form this genre. Not only do the conventions of railroad photography correspond with the history of trains, but with the parallel history of photography.

Most of the photographs in this series contain plunging perspectival recessions that only the sight of receding parallel structures like tracks and trestles, trains and roads, can produce. Since such imagery reiterates the effect of Renaissance perspectival systems, which underlie the invention of photographic ways of seeing, *Railroad Photographs* relays the viewer's attention beyond the "rolling stock" it pictures to consider the technical preconditions for photography itself.

Among the series' many representations of trains, some, like those in *Swissvale, PA* and *Mohawk River Crossing, Rotterdam Junction, NY*, approach from a distance; others, as in "*Lake Shore Limited*," *7 AM, Cleveland, OH*, and *Metro-North Leaving Croton-Harmon Station, 7:47 PM, Croton, NY*, are stationary and very close at hand. All, however, convey a palpable sense of immanence; of things that photography describes, precisely, as coming-and-gone or going-and-gone.

Landscapes devoid of trains, but scored by their tracks, induce reveries as startling in their temporal expanse as the driving perspectives that so often cause them. It is hard to look at an image like *Signals, Sand Patch, PA* without wondering about the people who passed that spot over the span of a century or more; who gazed through the windows of passing trains and

rested their eyes on that stone, or that tree; or who lulled themselves into semi-sleep, their eyes fixed on the lazy arcs of wire linking telephone poles.

Time is the ultimate subject of *Railroad Photographs*, which makes it especially noteworthy that those who practice this genre take such pains to document the precise time and place at which a train is sighted and shot. This pragmatic convention is not without pathos, which centers on the desire to stop the passage of time. It is significant to Welling's project that even as the invention of trains contributed to a heightened awareness of transitoriness, the invention of photography promised the symbolic means to arrest the terrifying consequences of this flux.

Although Welling's architectural photographs consist of straightforward studies of 19th-century structures by the American architect Henry Hobson Richardson, they also exceed this representational function to reflect on photography's curious suspension of past and present. As an examination of buildings by the most esteemed practitioner of the American Romanesque Revival, *Architectural Photographs* effectively mirrors Welling's own art. One image - that of the MacVeagh House in Chicago - differs from others insofar as it directly copies an existing photograph. Demolished in 1922, the MacVeagh House fell victim to the ultimately iconoclastic, functionalist logic that Richardson's own organic structures helped set in motion. In modernist art, a comparable belief in aesthetic progress induced a similar disregard for the richness and complexity of representation. Welling's appropriations of existing genres overturns this iconoclastic impulse; without, however, claiming unmediated access to the traditions he recovers.

MacVeagh House, Chicago, IL, 1885-87, Demolished 1922 (1989) demonstrates one way in which the appropriational gesture that characterizes Welling's process in general, and this image in particular, restores complexity to the supposed transparency of photographic representation. This image brings to mind another one, which helped Roland Barthes to understand the intensity of his response to certain photographs. In 1865, Alexander Gardner took a picture of a handsome young man named Lewis Payne, who was convicted of trying to assassinate Secretary of State W. H. Seward. Pictured in manacles in his prison cell before hanging, this portrait dramatized for Barthes the tragedy that every photograph contains, but that

most photographers are determined to conceal behind a profusion of lively and distracting detail. This tragedy centers on the fact that what photography represents so vividly (“that-has-been”) can no longer be. “He is dead,” Barthes realized about Lewis Payne, “and he is going to die.”⁵ With little modification, the same can be said of the MacVeagh House in Welling’s photograph.

Stable Dormer, Glessner House, Chicago IL, 1885-87 (1988) recalls three more sumptuous dormers in the roof of the doomed MacVeagh House. This image suggests the extent to which history functions as a trope for desire in Welling’s work. It also reveals the extent to which his practice actually works to counter the kind of morbidity that Roland Barthes found so central to photography. To isolate this hooded structure in such tight close-up is to revisit the demolished building in the faded image; to find evidence, moreover, of the past surviving in things that still exist. In this regard, it is significant that the most conspicuous characteristic about the objects of Welling’s investigation is a granite stolidity that defies the ravages of time.

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Throughout the fifteen years that James Welling has engaged in his particular kind of serial photography, his flexible method has enabled him to look at the world and fashion a distinctive aesthetic vision. His allegorist’s approach has ensured that, no matter what he pictures, it provokes a sensation of yearning. Fueled by desire, and by an acute sense of history, this artist fuses past and present in photographs that induce reflection upon things that, though distant, are still with us.

Notes

- ¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, Hill & Wang, 1981).
- ² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), p. 42.
- ³ See Trevor Fairbrother, “James Welling,” in *The Binational: American Art of the Late 80’s* (exh. cat., Cologne, DuMont Buchverlag, 1988), p. 220.
- ⁴ In 1990 Welling exhibited a series of railroad photographs executed in France. See James Welling, *Les Voies Ferrees: St. Etienne et la Plaine du Forez* (exh. cat., Saint Etienne, Maison de la Culture et de la Communication, 1990).
- ⁵ Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 96.